

THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF CHINA PAINTING

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Photographed by Gary Hestilow, Richard Grayson, and June Grayson

Have you inherited a china plate awash with lush roses hand-painted by a beloved great-grandmother? Lucky you. You are part of the wonderful world of porcelain painting which began in China 2,000 years ago.

In spite of periodic political upheavals, Chinese pottery workers have experimented with clays, kilns, glazes, and decorating since 200 B. C. Utilizing local deposits of a rare white clay, they developed the fine porcelain products of the T'ang dynasty of 618-906 AD.

In the early 18th century, one million people in Ching-te-Chen, China, shaped and fired porcelain in its three thousand kilns. The clipper ships of the English East India Company transported Oriental porcelains and teas to an eager European market.

Chien-te-Chin still has 220 porcelain factories that employ 100,000 people, one-fourth of its total population. Its splendid products are exported throughout the world.

Europeans once thought porcelain more precious than gold. They began importing it from China in the 16th century. In 1503 Queen Isabella of Spain owned a white porcelain bowl framed and mounted in 22 carat gold.

For centuries, Europeans tried to discover the secrets of Chinese porcelain manufacture. An alchemist, Johann Friedrich Boettger, imprisoned by Augustus the Strong, king of Poland, to make gold, mixed local clays to create a porcelain similar to the Chinese product in 1709.

Augustus established the still famous Meissen Porcelain Factory. He kept Boettger and his assistants under guard so other rulers would not kidnap them and learn their manufacturing techniques. Meissen china became the rage of Europe.

Eventually the secrets slipped out, porcelain manufacture spread throughout Europe, and the porcelain "craze" was on. Mme. de Pompadour, mistress of the French King and benefactress of the French porcelain factory at Sevres, insisted that "to have money and not buy porcelain is to be a bad citizen of France."

A seventeenth-century English poet, Robert Wilde, asserted that porcelain was:

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"... a piece of Christ, a star in dust,

A vein in gold, a china dish that must

Be used in Heaven, when God shall feed the just."

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Porcelain painting promoted women's liberation. In 1815, Henry Doulton, an English pottery owner, allowed women to work as

creative china painters. His employee, Hannah Barlow, became an internationally famous porcelain artist. His grateful female workers wrote, "We, the Lady Artists, desire to express our obligations to you for elevating so large a number of our sex and making arrangements for our comfort."

John Bloomfield, landowner in northern Ireland, discovered white clay on his property in the 1850s. He developed the famed Belleek china, eminently collectible from the first and still in production.

The Tucker China Factory in Philadelphia produced the first American porcelain in 1826. As European china factory workers immigrated to America in the 19th century, they established hundreds of small china factories. Lenox, Inc. and Pickard China survive today.

The Mayflower held no trunks packed with fine porcelain when it landed in Massachusetts in 1620. Communal serving bowls were made of pewter and earthenware. Individual dishes were rare. Settlers carved small wooden plates out of crosscut pieces of logs. Wealthy families used silverplate.

The mass production techniques of the Industrial Revolution enabled china factories to turn out millions of dishes affordable

by almost every family. Factory owners needed thousands of porcelain artists. Because of the social restrictions of the Victorian age, china painting was one of the few jobs appropriate for proper young women.

Even if they did not need to work, Victorian women painted china to express their artistic talents and beautify their homes. Factory and home decorated china did not differ in quality: talented artists worked either place. Unlike machine-made china, no two pieces of hand-painted china are exactly alike - and that is part of its appeal.

No Victorian home could be without a berry set, a large serving dish with matching smaller dishes. Chocolate sets with a tall slender pitcher and matching cups were also popular. Anything made out of china could be hand-painted: parlor lamps, dining room chandeliers, wall tiles, umbrella stands, and porcelain dolls.

Two 20th century world wars, with the bombing of European cities and destruction of many porcelain factories, and the Great Depression of the 1930s almost destroyed the porcelain industry. Now, however, porcelain manufacture and the art of porcelain painting has rebounded throughout the world. Two international organizations based in the United States have contributed to this

rebirth - The World Organization of China Painters (WOCP), with its headquarters in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and International Porcelain Artists, Inc., in Dallas, Texas.

"If you love your home and want to create beautiful things, become a china painter," advises Billie Jean Guttendorf, a china painting teacher for twenty years in Aurora, Illinois. "You don't need to be a wonderful artist, but you have to have a fervent desire, along with plenty of patience and determination."

You also need time and money. An initial set of painter's palette, paints, and brushes can cost \$100.00. Weekly group classes or private lessons cost from \$5.00 to \$20.00. The glazed china blanks on which to paint are additional: a small round plate may cost \$8.00, a five piece table setting \$30.00, and a jewelry pendant \$3.00.

Your teacher will supply the kiln, for your china object will require at least three firings up to 1,400 degrees Fahrenheit. You will apply the paints in very thin layers each time so they will fuse smoothly into the glaze from the heat of the kiln. After you become proficient, you will want your own kiln (\$400.00 and up).

You can trace a design for your first plate from thousands

of pattern books published by china teachers. "Your goal is to develop original designs with pleasing colors and a balanced composition, but most beginners are too nervous to do this at first," explains Billie Jean.

Some art critics refuse to recognize porcelain painting as a fine art. Pauline Salyer, porcelain artist and founder of the WOCP, does not mince words: "Anyone who says that is just plain dumb. Porcelain painting is the oldest continuous fine art form - and the most difficult one - in the world."

Pauline is that rare person: an artist with organizational skills and a life-long passion for china painting. Even as a mother of four small children, she always took private lessons in china painting. "There were other china painters then, but we weren't organized. I thought that if we banded together, we could afford to buy group kilns and hire teachers to share advanced techniques."

She started the WOCP in 1962 with headquarters in her Oklahoma City home. Twelve china painters unite to form a local club. Regional, state, national, and international meetings keep its current nine thousand members abreast of new developments, instill enthusiasm, schedule teaching seminars, and provide booths where members can sell their creations to other members

and outside visitors.

Don't become a china painter to make a quick buck. Most china painters agree with one member who says, "I will never sell anything I make. Nothing could ever repay me for the time and devotion I put into every piece."

One talented china painter, however, makes a fine living reproducing broken parts of Victorian art lamps. Some artists teach and publish books for other china painters. Galleries and boutiques accept hand-painted china for consignment sales. Popular one-of-a-kind jewelry items, featuring hand-painted pendants, sell from \$50.00 to \$150.00. Members of local clubs hold yearly exhibitions for the public and sometimes display at area arts and craft shows.

China painting can be a shared passion. An Oklahoma grandmother, daughter, and granddaughter designed and painted the decorated tiles in the kitchen and five bathrooms of their new home. Pauline has painted a 12 place dinnerware set for each of her children. She designed and painted a decorative plate for each of her seven granddaughters for this year's Christmas present.

Such artists have spent years developing their talents.

"When you have painted 10,000 roses, you will paint a rose as well as I do," says Sonie Ames, a Paradise, California teacher.

Yet no investment is too much for a true devotee of china painting. "People will always find the time and money to do what they truly love," Pauline thinks.

WOCP now owns a spacious building in Oklahoma City which includes the Foundation Center Museum, the only museum in the United States devoted entirely to fine porcelain. Members donate the prize-winning porcelains from all state and international exhibitions for the museum's permanent collection. Advanced collectors of fine porcelain can donate their treasures to the museum to be guarded, displayed, studied, and enjoyed forever.

Whether you enter the wonderful world of china painting as an admirer or an artist, you can say with Thomas Moore, the nineteenth century English poet:

"You may break, you may shatter, the vase if you will,

But the scent of the roses will hang round it still."

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For more information on china painting, write or call:

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